



Slowing Life's Wheel

The Photography of Susan Richman

STORY BY Abby Luby PHOTOGRAPHY BY Susan Richman and Andrea B. Swenson

Nature can be fleeting. Wide-eyed, we witness the buzz and flurry of spawning flora and fauna, instilling a desire to slow and capture every miraculous moment.

Preserving that flash of time is what artist and photographer Susan Richman adeptly captures in her work. These densely layered images open the door to contemplate the rich, organic compilations — elements of our ephemeral cosmos. Strata of natural elements convene as viscous, rhapsodic assemblages of contrasting textures, light and form, come together, dancing within the frame.

As painterly as her work is, Richman never had any formal art training and it wasn't until a required photography course as a college undergraduate that sparked her creativity.

"I was smitten," Richman says, recalling the first time she began taking pictures and developing them in a dark-room using negatives. "I started experimenting and layering different negatives to create my own unique world."



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Richman went on to major in fine arts and photography and became a successful commercial photographer in New York City. When she became a parent of twins, she found it challenging to juggle parenting with work. "I put my career on hold, moved to Hastings on Hudson and didn't pick up the camera for 15 years," she says. "But one day I pulled out my camera and started shooting and fell in love with photography all over again."

Temporality and impermanence would come to define Richman's photographic oeuvre. She took to the photographic genre known as "ruin porn," and sought out abandon buildings and factories once vibrant with life. "These buildings were factories where people probably spent 30 or 40 years of their lives," Richman explains. "These decaying buildings slated to be torn down or repurposed hold memories."

Fueling Richman's sense of the ephemeral was the concept of erasing



physical structures that once shaped collective memory and catapulted her in a new direction. As an avid hiker and gardener, she was drawn to suspending the flux of nature in the ever-changing seasons. "I wondered how could I present something that had a temporal nature that goes on in our world."

Richman shifted from photographing what was in front of her lens to creating an environment of aesthetically placed natural elements. Her palette consists of flowers, grasses, leaves, dead insects and animals (that died naturally) arranged onto different backgrounds and papers. Added to each layer are chemicals, dyes, paints, water, a compilation that was then literally frozen. Richman photographed the slow melting transformation, each evolving image assuming a newly composed form. "These were re-formations, mini sculptures and would, in a way, be a portal to another world," Richman says.

Work similarly created and labeled "Ephemeral" are round, aqueous shapes yielding a gelatinous stir seeming to elicit soft murmurs. Works such as "Tenuous" and "Sprightly" are abstract, biomorphic, at once mysterious and palpable. Richman eventually moved on from the labor-intensive process of creating a scene, freezing it, melting and then photographing. Instead, she placed her botanical materials on different sheets of glass, added certain thickening liquids, dyes, brush painted certain surfaces and would scratch through the glass using a technique known as frottage.



Richman's "Jenga" series are works inspired by Victorian era photographs called Memento Mori created to commemorate the deceased; the game of Jenga is also symbolic where stacked blocks are removed one by one depicting the collapse of the earth's sustainable pillars. The very dreamy "Flight From Giverny" immerses one into a world of crisp flower petals brandishing tiny veins as a creamy Luna moth arches over a shimmery surface, moving to a mellow hum. In

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"Drawn to a Flicker" the sky swirls in teals and blues around a dark, splayed moth hovering over airy, dried grasses and pressed flowers. The large size of both these works (32 by 48 inches) invites a viewer to be totally absorbed. For Richman, this body of work memorializes what animals and insects are lost due to climate change, shifting habitats, use of pesticides and industrialization. "I grew up in Washington, Pennsylvania



near a farm and I remember so many insects whose population are now in decline," she recalls. "Our food resources depend on many of these pollinators, such as the monarch butterfly."

A poised, monarch butterfly is prominent in "Flitting About," her wings upright and solid amidst a swoosh of yellow, pink and white flowers. In "Bug Off," a queen bee is stayed from her descent to a blossomed pink flower as soft watery eddies ripple throughout the frame.

Richman's work has been shown widely; most recently in a solo exhibition at Upstream Gallery in Hastings on Hudson, at the Salmagundi Club in New York City where her photograph *Birds Of A Feather* won Best in Show and at the Annual Interna-



Richman layers materials and scrapes a jagged piece of glass through liquids on the top layer of glass, a technique known as frottage. The effect of these "scratches" in the liquid, creates a sense of movement that appears in much of her work.

tional Juried Exhibition at the Soho Photo Gallery in New York City. She is a teacher at The International Center for Photography in New York City and is currently a member of the Upstream Gallery. Recent awards and recognitions include, Finalist, 2021 Larry Salley Photography Award, ArtsWestchester, and featured artist in both 2021 F Stop Magazine and 2020 Create Magazine. In 2019, The New York Times and The Washington Post highlighted her work in an article titled "Elements Provide Inspiration at Architectural Digest Show."

www.susanrichmanphotography.com

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BY ABBY LUBY

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